

From decentralisation to centralisation of community secondary schools in Botswana: A community disenfranchisement in education

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This position paper explores the nature of community involvement in education, focusing particularly on Botswana schools. The exploration was made against a decision taken by the Ministry of Education to end the partnership venture established in the 1980s between itself and the local communities in the running of the junior secondary school. The paper was informed by views of a group of Heads of junior secondary schools who only a few years ago co-managed these schools with the Board of Governors. Relevant literature aided and backed the argumentation of the paper. The paper began by an examination of the concept of a community. This was followed by a background, to illuminate the discussion of the paper, detailing the evolution of community schools in Botswana. The paper concluded that the decision taken by the Government to terminate its partnership with communities had the potential to demotivate community participation in education at both the local and national levels.

Community, decentralisation, board of governors, educational partnership

CONCEPT OF A COMMUNITY

The term community cannot be taken for granted as self-evident because it can be employed in a wide variety of contexts and usages. One can speak of the business community, the academic community, the Botswana community, the Muslim community and so on. What is common among the different communities, however, is that each community is wedded together by a common intent. In relation to education, four types of communities are prominent. The definitions of the types of communities are summaries based on Collier's (1994) description of co-operative communities and on their description as "groups of people together in a location or people with some sort of relational grouping". First, there is the village type or traditional or indigenous community. Inhabitants of this type of community are usually a closely knitted group, whose members have a deep sense of belonging. Members share many so called 'commons' such as a common culture, history, future, values, language, social activities such as weddings, funerals and common water points for their livestock. In such a community, one's concern is everybody's concern. Collier's (1994, p. 101) definition of a community suits well the traditional community as:

...a group of people who have existed throughout history and sharing unconventional ideas, or ... a population aggregate inhabiting a contiguous territory, integrated through common experiences ... conscious of its unity, and able to act effectively in a crisis.

Second, there is an adopted community which is found mostly in towns and cities. Members of this community are a heterogeneous group held together by, for instance, the same school their children go to. Their allegiance to the school can at best be described as temporary and artificial. Parents' bonds (if any) with the school get broken immediately their children cease to be students

at the school. Although parents may share the same residential location, the structures of the community may not exert a common influence on the different life styles within the neighbours because of their diverse backgrounds. The third type of community can be described as made up of members who do not necessarily share the same neighbourhood but may share a common religion, culture, and ethnicity. The fourth type of community is the national community, referring to all citizens of a country irrespective of their race, colour or cultural origin. The Botswana community in the 1970s, for example, contributed towards the building of a national university making individual contributions through different means such as livestock, cash, and crops. The first two definitions; the traditional and adopted communities are closely relevant in describing the participation in education by communities in Botswana. The usage of the term community in this paper is therefore to be understood in the contexts of these two definitions.

BACKGROUND

This section traces the background of community secondary schools in Botswana and discusses their evolution from private and independent to government institutions. Local communities in Botswana have some history of involvement in the provision of education despite their low level of education. When formal education was first introduced in Botswana in the nineteenth century educational facilities were very basic (Ramsay, Morton and Mgadla, 1996). In a number of primary schools mud and grass-thatched structures were built by communities to provide better places for teaching than the shades of trees. This community spirit was later to be extended to the secondary schools during the twentieth century. Secondary schools such as Moeng College built in 1949; Phuthadikobo in the 1950s; and Seepapitso in 1950 (Ministry of Education, 1984) were community initiatives. People donated livestock, cash, and volunteered their labour and skills towards the building of these schools.

Other communities took their cue from these success stories and between 1968 and 1973, built secondary schools of their own such as Mahalapye, Ipelegeng, Itireleng, and others (Ministry of Education, 1984). Communities, in building these schools, were responding to a need for secondary education for children who could not find places in the limited number of government and church schools. At that time there were only nine such schools (Ministry of Education, 1984). The community schools were wholly financed by the communities and each school was run by a Board of Governors or by a School Council. Though the schools were private and independent they followed the same academic curriculum that the government schools followed. The academic achievement of students at these schools was always lower than that of students at the government schools (Education Statistics, 1976) because of the comparatively inferior resources (untrained teachers and limited funds). The Government, in its first National Commission on Education (Education for Kagisano, 1977), committed itself to release these schools from their financial predicament, but without taking away the people's involvement in the schools. Though this move was made with good intentions, it marked the beginning of the people's loss of independent control over the schools. Gradually the schools' management evolved from private and independent through to a partnership and eventually to sole government control.

The ideals of a partnership between the Government and the local communities to forge consensus in the provision of education started only in the mid-1970s in Botswana. These ideals have been encapsulated in the 1977 (Education for Kagisano) and 1993 (Report of the National Commission on Education) National Commissions on Education, the details of which are stated in this section. In addition to the financial support, the Government also offered to improve the management of the schools. The Government was concerned that:

Education cannot achieve its goals if it is not pursued in partnership with the community. The Government strongly recommends that the community should as much as possible participate in the development and management ... this educational

partnership brings parents closer to the school ..(Primary School Management Manual (2000, p. 80)

The partnership venture was also born from the specific concern that:

The Commission has learned from many submissions and from its own visits to secondary schools that the community aspects of secondary education are weak, both in terms of the social/community life in the school and in terms of the link between the school and the community in which the school is located. (Education for Kagisano, 1977, p. 119)

The notion of a partnership was consistent with the widely held realisation that schools were open systems which could benefit from their communities in as-much-as communities could benefit from them (Hoy and Miskel, 2001; Hanson, 2003; Owens, 2004). It was also consistent with the view that where parents were actively involved in their local schools, and with their children's education, the whole learning community was stronger and better learning outcomes were achieved (Rycroft, 2005). In addition, when schools worked together with families to support learning children tended to succeed not just in school, but throughout life and that when parents were involved in their children's education at home, the children did better in school (Henderson and Berla, 1994). Subsequent to this realisation a new type of community secondary school emerged in 1984 in Botswana (Report of the National Commission on Education, 1993, p. 142). This happened at a time when the country was experiencing economic boom. The diamonds were selling well and the beef industry was flourishing. The government could therefore afford to spread schools, as it did, throughout the country and extend educational services to all social groups. More teachers were trained and externally recruited to match the fast expanding secondary education.

Boards of Governors were formed to run the community junior secondary schools. The Boards were legally empowered to receive and spend funds, an arrangement which would give them flexibility in buying, selling, or renting and raising money "as the direct involvement of the local community in the operation of educational institutions is essential" (Report of the National Commission on Education, 1993, p. 379). Taking the educational operations to the local authorities by the Botswana Government was in itself empowerment to the communities. Scott and Jaffe (1991) defined empowerment as the desire for people to make a difference and the organization's willingness to harness their enthusiasm. The desire by one party to get involved and the acceptance of this by the other party resulted in a relationship between the two. As Scott and Jaffe cautioned, empowerment was not boundless. The Boards of Governors were to operate within the statutory instrument framework of the Minister of Education. The roles for each partner were clearly defined. The Government's role in the educational marriage was concerned mainly with issues of the curriculum, technical support and the provision of most of the physical infrastructure such as classrooms. The construction of dining hall and kitchen was to be the responsibility of the respective communities. The provision of staff houses was to be a joint responsibility between the communities and the Government. Each school would have a 13 member Board of Governors, comprising members of the community and Ministry of Education to run its affairs. Community representatives were voted into the Boards mainly on account of their social standing in the community and not necessarily on their educational influence because educational attainment was a rare strength among village community members (Molosi, 1993). The Chairpersons of the Board were invariably therefore dominated by business people in the communities. The Boards operated under guidelines that among other things specified that:

The Boards shall open bank accounts in the name of their respective schools, invest the funds of the school and raise and disburse funds as necessary or expedient for the proper running of the school(s). The Accounting Officer of the Ministry of Education shall have the power to exercise control and utilization of all such funds, stores and

buildings. (Board of Governors Guidelines for Government Aided Community Junior Secondary Schools, 1984, p. 7)

Initially the expenditure of the school finances was such that any two of the three (two members of the Board of Governors and the Head) could sign in the account, although accountability remained with the Head. This arrangement was later changed to have the Head as one of the two signatories.

Words and phrases such as ‘ownership’, ‘partnership’, ‘self-reliance’; ‘empowerment’, ‘stakeholders’, ‘do it for yourselves’; and ‘consultation’ which become clichés characterized the selling of the partnership venture to communities. Teams from the Ministries of Education and Local Government had traversed the length and breath of the country to sell the new type of community school in all its form and shape. And who could resist such a grand and noble idea, particularly in a country where post-primary educational opportunities for students were very limited. The idea was welcomed with a lot of enthusiasm by the communities and soon schools were built all over the country. Between 1984 and 2005, a total of 206 junior secondary schools had been built or revamped to the new type of secondary school (Education Statistics, 2004). As if the idea of a partnership was a project with a fixed lifetime, 20 years later, in 2004, the Government decided against the idea of a formal partnership in education with the community. Boards of Governors were dissolved and Government was to take these schools and run them along state owned schools lines (where monetary decisions were highly centralised), thus virtually taking away ownership of the schools from communities. This take-over meant that the Board members representing the community were automatically no longer signatories to the school account. This re-centralisation aroused great concern and strong reaction from the public. The Government was blamed for not having consulted the communities when control of the schools was assumed. Politicians, and in particular, councillors were unfazed about the decision as demonstrated by some of their comments: “It would have been better for the Government to play a monitoring role at such institutions, for example, in the management of finance, instead of a complete take-over, because there is already a lot in the hands of the Government”, (The Botswana Gazette, 2005:3). Problems now faced by schools as a result of the take-over were insurmountable, “because decision-makers are packed at headquarters”. “You cannot co-ordinate so many schools from one central point. The schools were better placed in the hands of communities” (*ibid*). The Government’s action was criticized as contradictory to its policy on outsourcing. On the one hand the Government talked of privatisation and outsourcing and on the other it was centralising educational institutions, such as brigades and community junior secondary schools. In defending the Government’s position, the Assistant Minister of Education said: “The Government decided to take over the schools because communities had difficulty managing them. In his submission the Minister of Presidential Affairs and Public Administration similarly argued that the Government decision was justified because people who were given the responsibility to manage the schools were failing to do so, arguing that “it is not a contradiction to outsource because where people cannot manage government has to step in”. “Local authorities and schools’ Boards of Governors are no longer in control because the Government now provides every resource for the running of such institutions”, he added (*ibid*).

SCHOOL LEADERS’ VIEWS ON THE TERMINATION OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Heads’ views were obtained using a semi-structured protocol and were presented as descriptive data and in tabular form (see Table 1).

The descriptive responses by school leaders were based on how justifiable and democratic the Government decision was and what were the likely consequences of the decision undertaken. A selection of these descriptive responses by the Heads is given.

The decision and the way it was executed was in order and appropriate. Consulting the communities would have caused delays in the take over process. After all, the Government has all along been financing the schools singled handed and its decision should not cause any problems. Schools will be efficiently run as there will be better controls financially and administratively. School Boards have been a hindrance to the efficient running of schools. The change will strengthen the PTA and parents see it that way and the PTA is well suited to continue the role of the School Boards.

There was no consultation and proper communication to the people involved in community junior secondary schools' management. The decision was undemocratic and unethical. Though the Ministry of Education might have had a good reason to dissolve Boards of Governors, its approach was unjustifiable. The news of a break away in partnership came down on the communities like a hurricane sweeping through relaxed and unsuspecting people. The way the Ministry of Education handled the whole issue is likely to affect voluntary participation in education by communities. Communities at large will have no forum to channel their views on education since they no longer have representative bodies at both the regional and national levels. The PTA, now as the sole community mouthpiece is unfortunately not as empowered as the Board of Governors was. Because committee members of the PTA do not get a sitting allowance they view their role in schools as voluntary and not binding. One head observed that: Parents would remain partners to the schools and not to government. Only members who had children at the school would be involved in education at the school level only. The Government has overstretched itself politically, resource wise and socially by unnecessarily shouldering a responsibility it ought to leave with communities. This, they argue is likely to backfire in the future because the Government would need community input and this might be difficult to achieve. Parents were becoming interested in the education they have helped shape. The decision to dissolve the School Boards has had a crushing blow on the communities' pride in their schools and their enthusiasm towards education had waned.

Table 1. Views of school heads on schools' take over by the Government

Decision	No. of Responses	Percentage
Justified and democratic	4	12
Justified and undemocratic	18	55
Unjustified and undemocratic	11	33
Total	33	100

DISCUSSION

The Heads' views presented above could not be judged as representative of the views of all Heads, but were, however, indicative of particular trends of thinking by the heads on the particular subject being investigated. Apart from the democratic, moral and ethical considerations, two fundamental questions that could guide the discussion of the paper need to be asked. First, do the communities have a stake in the outcome of the decision by the Government? Second, could they have contributed expertise had they been involved in the decision? The answer(s) to these questions are found in the conclusion.

The idea of a partnership in education is akin to decentralisation, and particularly in the context of Botswana, the type of decentralisation Mok (2004, p. 7) refers to as: "... territorial decentralization that involves ... a redistribution of control among the geographical tiers of government, such as ... states/provinces, districts and schools". Decentralisation could arise from an increase in size of the organisation, the geographical separation of different parts of the organisation, or the need to extend services to remote areas such that they enjoy some measure of

autonomy (Mullins, 1993, p. 316). Decentralisation of education, a process of transferring decision-making authorities from higher to lower units of school governance has become a global phenomenon in the quest for quality education (Beare, Caldwell and Millikan, 1989, p. 71; Hung cited in Mok, 2004, p. 21).

Usually, when governments make decisions to re-centralise educational functions they want:

To assert control over key areas such as resource management including finance, so that the lines of control are simplified and made more direct; by the imposition of a number of efficiency disciplines ... and the abolition of many advisory and consultative bodies such as councils and boards. (Beare *et al.*, 1989, p. 71)

The reasons for centralisation are sometimes made to “improve economies of scale and a reduction in overhead costs; improve decision making which might otherwise be slower ...” (Mullins, 1993, p. 317).

The Botswana Government decision to terminate its official relationship with School Boards was based on the difficulty the Boards had in managing the schools. It is not clear, however, whether the difficulty was related to the management of the finances or other resources. It was as simply as “... where people cannot manage the Government has to step in”. Given the level of the Board members’ educational qualifications, they would indeed have had difficulty in managing schools. The inclusion of many of them in the Boards was not necessarily guided by their level of education. Rather, their political or social status in the community, particularly in the rural areas where the majority of the schools were, was the main guiding criteria in their selection. The financial system that was introduced in those schools did not help the situation either. A comparison of how the community and the government secondary schools financial systems operated showed that the system used in community schools was more prone to financial abuse. The community schools operated a cheque account system whereas government schools used a General Purchase Order as a transaction unit. The latter system did not involve hard cash. The seemingly loose accounting system used at community schools was the most likely reason that motivated the Government action.

It is clear from Table 1 that most Heads (67%) supported the decision taken by the Government, possibly basing their support on the low educational levels of the Board members which constrained the expediency of decisions as lamented by one respondent that: “School Boards have been a hindrance to the efficient running of schools”. According to the information provided by the Heads in Table 1, the manner in which the Government reached its decision was less favourable to most of them. The majority (88%) felt the way the decision was executed was not democratic since the people on the ground were not consulted. As put by one Head: “The news of a breakaway . . . came down on the communities like a hurricane sweeping through relaxed and unsuspecting people”. One could view the decision as a betrayal to the brokered educational partnership between the Government and the communities and a denial to the communities of their rightful engagement with places where their children were being schooled. It was therefore a regression in the educational advancement of the country, in terms of community participation. The Government’s decision to withdraw school management is at odds with contemporary views on school community involvement by Beare *et al.* (1989); Sexton (2004); Glickman (1995) and Hacker, Wilson and Johnson (1999) that community participation in education is not an option.

The decentralisation of education to the local authorities has an element of empowerment to the site-based management or lower units of governance. Empowerment as a process, where administrators share power and help others use it in constructive ways to make decisions affecting themselves and their job, (Hoy and Miskel, 2001) has the potential to be translated into cooperation and teamwork between the one giving it and the one receiving it (Carnall, 1999). The giving of responsibility to the local authorities rather than managing functions from the centre has

become a much espoused management and administrative theory that taps into communities' sense of identity (Carnall, *ibid*).

In Australia, communities played a significant role in education. Parents were encouraged to participate beyond the traditional fund-raising roles. As Morgan (2000, p. 6) indicated:

Parents have representative bodies at state and territory level to represent their views to state governments. In turn, these state-level bodies have formed a national peak body, the Australian Council of State School Organisation to represent their consolidated views to the national government.

Local communities' role in school reforms is very essential. Not only is it important, they want to be meaningfully involved. The most credible communication with them about schools flows outward from personal communication. Attempts to deny them what they perceive to be their right can work against schools as "... they will always make their decision whether they are informed or not, so it is better they be informed and involved in what schools are planning" (Sexton, 2004, p. 7). Emphasising the importance of parental involvement in education, Glickman (1985) and Hacker, *et al.* (1999) argue that parents have certain knowledge about their children which the teachers and administrators are not aware of, and teachers and administrators have certain knowledge about the students which parents are not aware of. The knowledge gap cannot be bridged unless each of the parties shares what is known to it which the other does not know. The current wave of discipline problems in schools which has attracted much of the public's attention is a clear need for a closer cooperation between schools and their communities (Moswela, 2004).

Also, the need to include sex education in the school curriculum, for example, partly because of the frightening state of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the country in future needs the cooperation of parents because of the inherent cultural implications of the subject. Again, as the economy continues to decline, as it does, government may seek monetary relief from parents. Already, the Government has introduced a cost-sharing measure in education beginning in 2006 where each parent is to contribute five per cent of the cost of educating their child. Heads' view on the consequences of the Government decision was that, obtaining cooperation from communities and parents on such important issues could prove difficult for the Government to achieve as communities would no longer understand how they fitted into the larger mission. Remarks from government officials such as: "Local Authorities and schools' Boards of Governors are no longer in control because the Government now provides every resource for the running of such institutions", further distances communities and parents in particular, from participation in education. Encouraged by the above comment and by the councillors' protest against community disempowerment in education, communities might shift responsibility, including their own, to the Government for any failure by schools.

The other danger in denying participation of the local people in issues that affect them such as education as seen by Beare *et al.* (1989, p. 243) is that:

The more educated the population becomes, the more sophisticated are the demands and the stronger run the trends towards localisation and privatisation. . . . that any government which tries to stem the flood could be inundated by such a stream of locally oriented *administrivia* that centre will be in danger of collapse from overload. Decentralisation is therefore tending to become a coping reaction.

THE GOVERNMENT COULD HAVE HAD A BETTER APPROACH

Since the Government had involved communities when the idea of a partnership in education was first mooted, the withdrawal process, for ethical reasons, should have followed a similar path of consultation, at least to preserve some good relationships that might have been established during

the partnership. Community withdrawal from schools' management came at a time when more educated people were permanently relocating to villages as they retired from government service.

This was an opportunity for the Government to have exploited experience and talent to strengthen the partnership venture from people who could offer a more informed direction of education. If the Government concern was the inefficient use of the monies, which I think it was, the Boards could have been relieved of this aspect and been allowed to continue with the administrative function of schools. Beare *et al.* (1989) cautioned that as communities became more educated they might demand genuine involvement in schools, particularly if there were no sign of progress beyond words on the part of the Government or nothing suggesting that something was being delivered on the ground. As the educated retire and become active members of their communities, they are likely to demand their full involvement in the provision of education to the children.

CONCLUSIONS

The provision and management of an effective education system cannot be achieved without the deliberate participation of the people it purports to serve, the community. An attempt to exclude the community in educational issues is likely to be suicidal on the part of a government because by its nature, education is a public commodity. After toiling for so long and so much to provide basic infrastructure for schools the Government needs to applaud the community for its effort. Part of the partnership agreement is that boards, representing communities, are responsible for building part of the staff houses, the school kitchen, and that each parent with a child at the school paid some levy. The communities had made remarkable efforts in this regard with some achieving major projects such as the building of school hostels for the boarders and some had raised funds that purchased school vehicles and computers. The minority Heads' view that the involvement of school boards was not necessary because the Government wholly funded schools, is viewed by the author as a flawed argument.

In reference to the two questions asked at the beginning of the discussion section, the argumentation of the paper reveals that indeed the communities did have a stake in the decision. The decision affects the education of their children and they are taxpayers. Although they lacked expertise that sprung from their limited level of education, at least at the political level they were not ignorant and could have contributed to the decision. Since the situation was outside their zone of acceptance, they might see themselves as having been denied the right to participate. They might feel alienated and manipulated because they were sidelined in a crucial decision that directly involved them. Future calls by the Government to communities to participate in educational activities could be resisted. It is suggested that in order for the Ministry of Education not to lose a potential partner in education, it needs to expand the current roles of the PTAs and give them more say than they presently have without necessarily reverting to the Board of Governors system. Parental involvement in schools is limited mainly to ceremonial activities such as fund-raising for school ceremonies such as prize giving days and anniversaries. The Government may retain its strict control over the management of finances but the PTA's new role needs to open the opportunity for communities to have a bigger say in policy issues since it is evident that communities now have more educated members who are more informed and can therefore make quality contributions towards the development of education. Experience in Australia shows that although participation rates of parents are only a few percent, when there are major issues on the agenda, the level of participation rises, (Morgan, 2000).

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